Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

What Is Beyond a Diagnosis?

By **Chana Studley** - July 25, 2024

I was never given an official diagnosis. Back in the early 1980s in the UK no one would have thought to ask what their doctor was writing in our file. It was for them, not us, full consent wasn't in our consciousness. I had been sent to a psychiatrist at Manchester Royal Infirmary after my 2nd violent mugging; I wasn't eating or sleeping. I had repeatedly punched the wall in a desperation bruising my hands and spent my days reliving and reliving the terror of what had happened.

My skull had been fractured in a nightclub and then a year later I was 'jumped' by three men as I walked near my home at 6 o'clock in the evening. They beat me so hard I 'knew' I was going to die. I was now terrified to leave my home and so it had taken several panic attacks just to get to the hospital. I can only guess that she wrote; PTSD, agoraphobia, insomnia? Nobody talked about self-harm back then.

And then it happened again. Two years later I was living in London and while riding my bike home from the theater where I worked, a young teenage boy threw a child's bike at my head, smashing me into the gutter. I found out later he had broken the top two vertebrae in my neck. My mental health went down fast this time. All those symptoms came back and worse until I was unable to get out of my bedroom,

stuck in a world of mental terror. Eventually I reached out to a women's crisis center who helped me back on my feet. This started a life long journey of helping others out of the darkness.

One of the counselors at the crisis center had asked me a simple but profound question; Are you ready to let go of your story? I was extremely offended at first. What I heard her say was, it didn't happen, it didn't hurt and get over it. In my head I was screaming. *It did happen, it did hurt and I can't get over it!* But as I calmed down, I realized that what happened to me had become my identity—I was the girl who had been mugged three times. This story I was telling and retelling myself had stopped me moving forward with my life. I had innocently got stuck in the feeling of reliving those thoughts as if it was all still happening. I saw that if I didn't listen to them, I would be free of it all. This insight started a journey of understanding how the mind works and this is what has brought me freedom and recovery.

The simple fact is that we are always feeling our thinking. I thought I was feeling the sadness and terror of my circumstances, but the events were over. I was now feeling the terror of the memories of them in this fresh new moment. I saw that I was innocently bringing the distress of the past into the present and this was what dysregulating my nervous system now. This is what rumination and anxiety really is. If our thoughts are full or anxious, panicky, catastrophizing thoughts then we aren't going to feel great. It was so simple that I couldn't believe it at first. I had agonizing chronic pain in my back and neck for 25 years. Now I see that my body was screaming at me to slow down and come back to this moment where I am safe. As soon as I started to grasp that we live in a thought created world and that underneath all that stressful thinking I was ok, my pain simply went away. The anxiety was innocently keeping the pain going after the injuries had healed.

This simple understanding has helped thousands of people recover from all kinds of mental distress. When each person saw that they had been torturing themselves with their own thinking they recovered too. We all have innate wellbeing. All those natural and understandable human reactions to distressing life situations are actually wisdom trying to keep us safe, we just didn't understand the signals. We were told that our brains are broken or that we would just have to cope.

But what if you had been told you can never be broken and don't need fixing?

What if you knew you could recover too?

And when I say recover, I mean fully recover. Despite being told they had a chemical imbalance, or that it was genetic, or that they were damaged and would need to be on psychiatric medications for life, these people who have given me their stories have fully recovered. They are off medications, not needing any further treatments and living their best lives. From psychosis and schizophrenia to bulimia, OCD and CPTSD, they are free of symptoms. Like myself, no matter what they had been through, they found their innate resilience. They discovered that they could never be broken and didn't need fixing. From Chicago to London, from Sweden to South Africa, these are not flukes but facts of innate wellbeing.

Having a diagnosis is not a death sentence, *it's not even who we are*! What if together we could show that anyone can get well no matter what and that everyone, and I mean *everyone,* has access to mental wellbeing?

Have you ever had an idea pop into your head with such force you feel it? About two years ago I had such an idea, an insight; I have been a coach/counselor for over 35 years now and in that time I and my colleagues have seen many, many clients fully recover, like I did, from all kinds of mental health diagnoses and tragic life events.

What if I collected their stories?

What if I could show you how we recovered?

To get started I sent out emails to clients. My own experience with violence, anxiety and paralyzing chronic pain have led me to see that there is a common thread with how we all process these life experiences and so my client list is wide and varied.

Next I emailed colleagues asking if they had clients who would be willing to share their stories and for any case studies they would like to offer.

Finally I posted in a few Facebook groups dedicated to this philosophy of innate wellbeing.

The response was overwhelming. A steady stream of amazing individuals from all over the world replied with incredible openness to share their stories of hope and resilience.

I asked everyone for about 2000 words and gave them the choice of writing it themselves or I could interview them and transcribe it for their approval. I also gave them the choice of keeping their full names, changing their names or being anonymous. Most opted to use their full names and were happy, even proud to share the good news. In the end I transcribed and edited over 60 stories of recovery!

What did I discover?

The first thing that jumps out at you is the depth of human resilience. Resilience is often touted and sold as something we need to acquire from the outside. A product that needs to be learned or improved on, as if it's a thing. *We love to 'thingify' stuff.* But what these stories show is that it was there all the time, its innate, it was just covered up by years of innocent stinky thinking.

Like Judy Nahkies' story of suicidal ideation. After years of terrifying suicidal thoughts, she had finally researched how to die without anyone knowing it was suicide. In a final attempt to distract herself she went out to her New Zealand paddock to clean out the horses and put on her headphones to listen to YouTube. When the video ended another random one started with one of my colleagues. Michael Neill, a world class coach and best-selling author. He talked about the fact that we all have innate wellbeing

and are always feeling our thinking. Annoyed and desperate, she tried to switch it off but her hands were too muddy. So she is stuck listening to something that profoundly shifts her thinking and saves her life.

Another story tells of a young woman from Toronto who had drunk her way out of high school and was living on the streets cutting herself so badly she regularly needed stitches. After multiple psychiatric wards she hears that she has innate mental health and that she can never be broken. She takes exams and gets into University only to be told that her mental health record prevents them from offering her a place. So she goes back to the hospital to ask for a recommendation. She had left with 10 diagnoses including learning difficulties, borderline personality disorder and PTSD and multiple medications. She is now off all meds and the doctor doesn't even recognize her! For the first time in this doctor's career he writes a letter saying that a patient has fully recovered. This young woman recently graduated with her master's degree and is considering applying for her Ph.D.

The power of insight.

In each of the stories you hear over and over again that the person had an insight, a shift in their thinking. Willpower and techniques only get us so far. How many of us have promised ourselves to eat less, meditate more and sooner or later flake out. If willpower doesn't work for lifestyle changes, how on earth will it help with desperate and constant destructive intrusive thoughts? These people changed because of profound insight, a sight from within. Something shifted them into a fresh new perspective. Why does a woman with years of psychosis or a man with full blown alcoholism change? Because from this fresh new perspective it doesn't make sense to them to think and behave in that destructive way anymore.

Too simple I hear you say?

I am going to go out on a limb here to say that if you open the DSM to any page I guarantee you that the diagnosis started with prolonged stressful thinking. No one wakes up one morning and suddenly washes their hands 100 times. No one suddenly has a panic attack out of nowhere although it might feel like it. It always starts with some hurt feelings, resentment or unsolved grief or upset. Fueled by insecurity many innocently dive off the cliff into despair. Some will cope with these unbearable thoughts and feelings with secret rituals, others by abusing alcohol, food or drugs. I coped by screaming at myself to "shut up!" Others cope by violence to themselves or others and ultimately, when it's just too much to bear, hiding out in an alternate reality is a kinder escape than the unthinkable.

What if they knew that they didn't have to listen to that thinking? What if I had known back then that I am not my thoughts and just below the surface of the nightmare I was safe and it will pass?

This is what each of these 60 people saw with such clarity that they didn't need to act out any more. They saw that they are not their diagnosis or their thinking and that it always passes.

Drs. Caspi and Moffat in their 2018 paper, "All for One and One for All; Mental Disorders in One Dimension," published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry,* state that "empirical evidence has now accrued to suggest that a **single** dimension is able to measure a person's liability to mental disorder." These eminent doctors are agreeing that there is ONE cause for all mental suffering!

What is the one cause?

The one thing that derails us into mental health issues is an innocent misunderstanding of the role of Thought. I say innocent because we all do better when we know better. Knowing that you don't have to take your own thinking seriously and that any discomfort or anxiety will pass is priceless.

Our bodies are made with incredible wisdom to heal, well so are our minds! Our minds are designed with an alarm system and all these diagnoses are actually signals trying to get our attention. Agitation, urgency, doubt, are telling us that we need to slow down and come back to the moment. In every single diagnosis, the suffering starts with an innocent misunderstanding of the role of thought.

I have just been asked to co-author a research paper based on this data. Using these case studies, we will present this evidence to show that maladaptive repetitive thought leads to chronic mental stress. **Not** chemical imbalances, genetics, or trauma. Understanding this is profound and life changing, it is the way back to our innate mental health.

What is beyond a diagnosis?

Contentment, love and connection. A life of freedom, wellbeing and hope.

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https://www.beyond-diagnosis.com/resources

She has written 3 novels, *The Myth of Low Self Esteem, Painless, and Very Well,* and was an Amazon #1 best seller in 2022. Her latest book, *Beyond Diagnosis* is a critique of traditional psychology, with over 60 international stories of recovery. Chana has diplomas in psychology and pharmacology, is a World Health Organization First Responder and certified Life Coach.